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Rules of Engagement: Mr. Darcy's Courtship in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice

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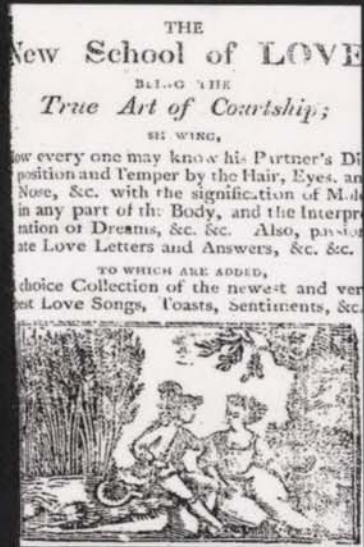
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RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: MR. DARCY'S COURTSHIP IN JANE AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

by: Victoria Lane

Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty, he had looked at her without admiration at the ball, and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticize. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes.



Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is most commonly regarded as a story of love. The narrative does indeed follow a marriage plotline, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet do fall in love and get married, but where within the narrative do we see any true sentiment revealed? The linear plot stretches from beginning to end; from their first meeting to their inevitable marriage. The space between must then be filled with the act of courting; each party's attempt at establishing a connection. However, the majority of the development of the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy is devoid of real connection, they are in separate spaces. Furthermore, they are fueled by pride and prejudice, two character defects which would presumably prevent romantic connections between two people. Yet, despite their seemingly debilitating flaws, they ultimately find love, or something like it, with one another.

Darcy is standoffish, and Elizabeth is unapproachable. Darcy's initial proposal to Elizabeth is not accepted. He proclaims, "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you" (230). Austen's use of the phrase 'in vain' on the surface reveals Darcy's inability to suppress his feelings. However, beneath the surface it echoes to Darcy's inherent vanity and reveals his underlying expectation that Elizabeth would receive his proposal with *gratitude*; she should be honored to receive such a proposal. She is not. Elizabeth is greatly offended. The truest testament of any sentiment is revealed in the letter Elizabeth receives from Darcy. This practice was endorsed by the culture; "An excess of sentiment was thought to be so effective with reluctant ladies that it was common practice to spatter a love letter with fake tears," but this is not Darcy's approach (Murray 2). Although Darcy does deliver a letter to Elizabeth, sentiment whether genuine or false is not the prideful Darcy's strongpoint.

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agreeable mate, through an assigned meaning to one's natural qualities. This is not an echo of being well bred it transcends genetics, bloodlines or inherited wealth; the new breed is groomed. The qualities which are attended to are wholly exterior and superficial, and no emphasis is placed on the natural occurrence of those qualities; they could be real or fake and mean the same thing.

The Regency and *Pride and Prejudice* share one key value, vanity. Darcy judges Elizabeth based upon the darkness of her eyes, Elizabeth falls in love with Pemberley and daydreams of becoming its mistress. *Pride and Prejudice* is an obvious critique on the social mores of the paradox of the culture from which it derived. Indeed, the courtship Mr. Darcy employs toward Elizabeth was effective, he played by the rules of Regency culture, as did she. Ultimately they both get what they want, she a pretty house, and he, a pretty wife. Austen paints the Regency paradox through 'pride' and 'prejudice,' the inherent *values* which Darcy and Elizabeth possess. They are products of the culture from which they sprang to life. Because Austen painted these characters with such precision, they are able to transcend the madness of their cultural climate, and melt into the shifts in cultural mores throughout time. Therefore, their superficial "connection" through a romanticizing modern lens, seems perfectly legitimate. It is equally as legitimate as their story was for the time in which Austen created them, in a time of discordant social standards, a culture which most certainly would love to see the marriage of 'pride' and 'prejudice' flourish.



Regency culture was a period of great paradox. The surface rarely revealed the underlying truth of any situation. Courtship therefore, would be no different than any other cultural element. The mores of conduct maintained hazy lines. Men may burst into tears and profess their love to women who might prefer to pursue the role of a mistress rather than a wife. Much of the culture hinged on one's own vanities and indulgences, and a pursuit of superficial connections.

The twenty four page pamphlet, *The New School of Love; Being the True Art of Courtship* (1800) sounds romantic enough, but in reality is filled with instructions on how to effectively judge the object of one's affection by their hair, nose, moles and eyes. It has love fueled correspondences, letters sent from one to another, but they are hardly as romantic as one might presume. Published around 1800, one would expect for it to elicit romance and sentiment, but it proves to be an actualization of the paradoxical culture from which it descended. The pamphlet's sentiment is hinged on the physical attributes of the prospective love interest, and these physical elements are assigned personality traits. In other words, the pamphlet draws a portrait of the perfect, most

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